



MASSAGE NEWS

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THE BREATH OF LIFE

KATHIE BAILEY

My client's breath was shallow. He never exhaled completely. He had come for bodywork in hopes of relieving his asthma. With one hand resting on his lower front rib area, feeling his limited breathing, I commented, "It feels puffed out here. What keeps you from collapsing, from giving in?"

"I could never give in to fear," he answered. "I've always had to be brave, in my family, in the army, at school. Throw out my chest and go on no matter what." After a few quiet moments he sighed deeply and said, "I guess I don't have to do that anymore. It's a relief." With wonder, we both noticed that his chest had gone flat. It no longer felt hollow under my hand, but solid, filled with life and gently moving with his easy breath.

What is breath? As massage therapists we often instruct our clients to breathe deeply, to relax, or to breathe into their bellies. What does this mean, what are we asking of them? In my Rosen Method bodywork practice, I use the breath as a clue, an indication of what the client is experiencing and how they are responding to my touch. When we get caught up in expectations of the right way to breathe and tell our clients how to do it, we can miss out on the rich source of feedback in the natural breath.

Most massage therapists notice a connection between tense muscles and emotional stress; between relaxed muscles and emotional well being. A missing link in this connection is the diaphragm, the primary breathing muscle. The diaphragm is unique because it is supplied with nerves from both the voluntary and involuntary nervous systems. This means that we can consciously control our breathing, and that our breath is controlled by our unconscious and is affected by our emotional responses.

In the Rosen Method, the breath is used as a guide to the client's inner experience. When a person expresses a deep personal truth, their breath responds, usually with a deeper breath or sigh, a

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physical letting go that can be seen and felt by the practitioner. This breath response is a trail, a clear track to the heart of the matter, that can be picked up and followed by the practitioner. The Rosen Method is body work which explores the connection between tense muscles and emotional patterns, using touch, talking, and the breath as tools.

Unresolved past experiences or emotions once unacceptable to those around us are held in the body as tight or blocked areas. As these areas are touched and drawn to the client's attention, they may re-experience the content of what is held in the body. Often, as happened with my client who had asthma, once a pattern is recognized and acknowledged, the body spontaneously releases the tension and regains its natural ease and relaxation. The breath can be used as a guide in this process because it is an accurate reflection of a person's feeling state. We can watch the breath change from the short, **The Breath of Life (To Page 3)**

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quick inhalation of excitement or fear, to the shuddering waves of sobs, to the quiet, deep breath of satisfaction or sleep.

When an infant breathes, its entire body, from head to toe, moves noticeably with its breath. The chest and abdomen swell and fill, then collapse, transmitting movement to the shoulders, neck, hips, and legs. The freedom and flexibility of the baby's relaxed muscles allow this movement, which is, in effect, an internal full body massage. It is easy to tell how the baby is feeling by watching it breathe: its body is a perfect expression of its self.

As adults, our bodies also express our internal selves. Our breath is as unique as our signature, telling the story of our lives. This story usually differs considerably from the full, eloquent breath of the infant. As we grow up, we often learn that our spontaneous self is not good enough. Parents or peers may react negatively to our tears, anger, creativity, or joy. We may be expected to maintain a stance of bravery, caretaking, niceness, or rebellion. In response, we forget ourselves and become what we must to get the love and approval we need. Usually, our bodies do the forgetting for us, by holding back what is unacceptable. Unconsciously, chests tighten to stop tears, shoulders rise to protect, backs arch to take the load, hips stiffen to keep from running away. And diaphragms tense up to restrain feelings. Thus, the client's body, its shape, tension, and breath, reveals their life experience.

Here are a few examples of breathing patterns and what they might indicate. Please keep in mind that these are not blueprints, and that each client must be approached individually and with respect for the uniqueness of how they have creatively survived life's pressures. The breath may be very small, bound by a compressed rib cage, showing that the client had to hold themselves in, could not express what was inside. Such a person is kept

narrow, unable to avail themselves of the choices and possibilities living within. If the breath is even and unchanging, the client may present a smooth "everything is fine" surface to the world, and be unable to reveal the more personal self. In some the breath moves only the abdomen, having to be forced up into the chest, pushed past a weight on the heart. Heavy, labored breath, forced exhales, indicate someone who is "working hard" at relaxing, or someone who doesn't know how to stop trying, for

whom everything is an effort. The client whose breath is never completely exhaled, often accompanied by a barrel chest, is someone who has had to be brave, always maintaining a stance of being bigger and stronger than they really feel.

All of these breathing patterns involve diaphragm tension. The relaxed

diaphragm is a dome-like shape, curving up toward the chest. When it contracts, the dome center pulls down, enlarging the chest cavity, and air rushes into the vacuum, which is inhalation. When the diaphragm relaxes, the dome moves back up and the air is pushed out for the exhalation. Tense diaphragms create recognizable body patterns. Often, a restricted diaphragm causes a high, bulging upper abdomen; as if the body weight were disproportionately settled there. This is because the diaphragm is never fully relaxed and the abdominal organs are pushed out of place. Diaphragm tension can also show up in the shape of the ribs. Sometimes the lower ribs flare out while the middle ribs are pressed in, and sometimes the entire rib cage is flattened

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down. In back, diaphragm tension causes tight muscles in the lower mid-back, and lack of movement in this area with the breath. This and other body areas that do not visibly move with breathing indicate areas of deep muscle tension. They remain still and unmoving, and are often the places where the client experiences pain or discomfort. As these areas are worked with in massage, the first clue to relaxation is that the breath moves into the area.

When the diaphragm is tense, it doesn't move throughout its range. Less oxygen is taken in. The surrounding organs, heart, lungs, stomach, and liver, get compressed and digestion doesn't flow properly. The esophagus and major blood vessels, which pass through the diaphragm's center, may get restricted, causing hiatal hernia and poor circulation. Undue pressure is put on the spine and ribcage at the diaphragm attachment points, causing muscle tension and postural imbalance. The relaxed diaphragm swings freely, gives an internal massage to the organs surrounding it, and transmits wavelike movements to the spine, ribs, chest, and abdomen. This slight motion helps keep our bodies relaxed and promotes physical health. When working with a client who has diaphragm tension, a hand placed just below the front of the ribs will enable the practitioner to feel the tension. Often a gentle hand resting on this area will encourage diaphragm relaxation. The release is often signalled by a digestive gurgles, a spontaneously deep breath, and more movement in the area. The client may also have an insight about their life at this point.

As the client is able to express what the muscles have been working so hard to hold back, the tension releases and the truth of their experience is available to them. Both the diaphragm and the other muscles relax and naturally return to a state of optimum ease. When the diaphragm is relaxed and moving freely, client often feels deeply peaceful and full of well being, experiencing trust in themselves and in life. This is the state of physical and emotional healing. The breath is the key, both in providing information for the practitioner, and in paving the way for the client to discover relaxation.

Kathie Bailey has a Rosen Method bodywork practice in the Twin Cities. She teaches classes and workshops on Rosen Method, and offers case consultation to massage therapists.